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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN IN DECEMBER -- DEATH OF NIYAZOV AND THE
UNPRECEDENTED BATTLE FOR FLEX

REF: 06 ASHGABAT 1285

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Post's December outreach was a mix of highs and lows associated with the annual battle to conduct testing for the Future Leaders Exchange Program, with low-key but effective outreach events at home in the Public Affairs Section. December's drama was matched and surpassed by the sudden death of President Saparmyrat Niyazov, a day after he celebrated his 21st anniversary in power in Turkmenistan. End Summary.

FLEX TESTING HIGHS AND LOWS, AND REQUEST FOR RETESTING

¶2. (U) FLEX Round I testing in December included both higher than usual turnouts in Mary and Dashoguz and dramatic cuts in participation in Ahal Welayat and Turkmenabat (reftel). As expected, there was no interference from school or ministry officials at the Ashgabat testing site, although students trickled in throughout the day as they snuck out of Olympiads or finished their Olympiads early. ACCELS opted to score all tests immediately, leaving no opportunity for Ministry of Education interference on Monday, and began three days of Round II testing on December 19. The Ashgabat testing site usually draws four to five times the numbers at other sites, and is open to students from all regions. This year post was hoping for higher numbers of regional participants -- only about 6 percent came from outside Ashgabat and those numbers did not include students ACCELS knew had been intimidated from testing at their home testing sites. However, 571 students took the Round I test, an increase of 36 percent over last year's Ashgabat tally. Even in Turkmenistan's capital city, the FLEX program represents the brightest educational opportunity for local high school students -- a fact often reiterated by the parents, younger and older students and their friends, who had come out to support the crowd of hopeful test-takers.

¶3. (U) Harassment of students, teachers and students' parents at the earlier testing sites, in Ahal Welayat and Turkmenabat, resulted in post's request for retesting at these sites. Post conveyed Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher's letter to President Niyazov soon after this request, and received confirmation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that retesting could go forth. Round III interviews were proceeding on January 21, in Turkmenbashi, when post received the news that the president had died. In the midst of a small battle with local teachers -- who were under orders to obstruct the interviews and harass the non-ethnic students taking part in FLEX in Turkmenbashi -- ACCELS was forced to cancel the interviews and await news of next steps as Turkmenistan entered a one-week period of mourning.

USAID RELIGION SPECIALIST HOSTS THOUGHT-PROVOKING DISCUSSION IN
ASHGABAT

14. (U) USAID's Religion and the State in Society Specialist David Hunsicker, a repeat visitor to Turkmenistan, hosted a lively and often personal discussion on religion in the United States for over 30 youth and older locals at the Public Affairs conference room in Ashgabat on December 15. After his talk on the constitutional and historical basis of religious belief in the United States, participants engaged in over an hour of question and answer with Hunsicker. Their questions ranged from the very personal to the theoretical, and included a question on U.S. judicial decisions that might conflict with religious belief --such as whether it was legal to have multiple wives under U.S. law. One participant asked about Hunsicker's assessment of religious freedom in Turkmenistan; this and a subsequent question brought up the U.S. Government's designation of Uzbekistan as a Country of Particular Concern. Following the discussion, most participants picked up copies of the IIP publication Muslim Life in America, in Russian; some took several to give to their friends, colleagues and students.

USG GRANTEE ENHANCES EMBASSY OUTREACH WITH PUBLIC EXHIBITION

15. (U) Representatives of the Belarusian, Kazakh, Russian, and other diplomatic missions, as well as a local employee of the Iranian Cultural Center and representatives of local civic groups, appeared at the Public Affairs Section's conference room and Internet Resource Center on December 12 to view an exhibition of works created through Democracy Commission support. Cultural Affairs Officer Sarah Hutchison gave opening remarks for the event, organized by project grantee Ludmila Kiseleva. The event gave Public Affairs staff the chance to introduce the Information Resources Center to diplomats who did not attend the PAS public opening in Spring 2006. Representatives of the Russian Embassy were particularly interested in the center, and said that they hoped to

ASHGABAT 00000057 002 OF 003

open something similar in Ashgabat. The representative of the Iranian Cultural Center approached the CAO for her contact information, initially without introducing herself, but this gave both CAO and PAO a chance to ask whether the Iranian Center has a calendar of public events that they would like to share with the embassy, in return for a copy of the Public Affairs Section's own calendar of events. The state-run Miras TV channel also covered the event and took interviews of some of the attendees, coverage slated to air in January 2007. The project, funded from summer 2005, has successfully provided training in carpet weaving, dying, silk weaving, embroidery and similar skills to unemployed women and housewives throughout Ahal region. Kiseleva is now planning to open a shop in Ashgabat where the women can sell these goods, and has discussed with Public Affairs ways to more effectively market these goods to a larger audience.

TURKMENISTAN WIKISPACE SPARKS YOUTH INTERNET OUTREACH

16. (U) For the past three months, more than 20 secondary school students from Ashgabat, Dashoguz, Mary, and Turkmenabat have been preparing to participate in the GCE online Wikispaces encyclopedia project at <http://Turkmenistan.wikispaces.com>. In addition to learning how to use a wiki platform, students have been gathering information about Turkmenistan to post in what will become Turkmenistan's most comprehensive website about the country by its citizens. Teachers and students are tasked with adding resources in a collaborative effort about Turkmenistan and its government, geography, economy, education, culture and history. The teams will add to and correct each other's entries, using Turkmen, English, and Russian. Wikispaces is an easy-to-use, open-source service, which allows any user to create a Wikipedia-type collaborative resource. On December 18, Azat Haitov (FLEX 06) and two other USG alumni posted information about Turkmenistan's climate, terrain, flora, fauna and natural resources on tm-wikispace, using information gathered from the National Library and other sources: (<http://Turkmenistan-rus.wikispaces.com/geography>). The project is only in its early stages and will gather steam as more students and teachers learn to use the Internet and gain interest in contributing to the Web with the knowledge they have about their country.

TEACHERS ENRICH LESSON PLANS WITH INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

17. (U) In December, teachers in Ashgabat, Turkmenabat, Dashoguz and Mary submitted 12 more lesson plans in English and Russian to the Global Connections and Exchange Turkmenistan Educational Portal (<http://gcetm.net/index.php?newlang+eng&module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=29>), having completed the Global Connections and Exchange course on integrating Internet technology into education. Teachers participating in the program's Modern Lesson Plan Contest have already generated 22 lesson plans since November. Themes for these plans include English, mathematics, geography, Russian, and literature. GCE conducted courses in November and December on basic computer skills for secondary school teachers and ICT usage in the classrooms, focusing on the use of multimedia resources integration into the curriculum. Teachers learned to assess students' needs and design lessons to meet a variety of learning styles, using tools from the GCE site. Many teachers who posted lessons in December learned more about the initiative by perusing the GCE teachers' forum at <http://gcetm.net/forum/index.php?s=d1da7df363930ea04e3f42b8523cc303&showforum=4>. Among the lesson plans submitted in December was an integrated lesson of mathematics and literature by Oksana Garipova, an experienced teacher from Ashgabat's Turkmen-Russian School. The lesson combines subjects, attempting to force students to solve mathematical problems while reading a famous fairy tale of Pushkin. (Comment: The Government of Turkmenistan officially has rejected the GCE program. Locals continue to participate, however, on a voluntary basis. Post continues to request that the government approve the program. End Comment.)

STUDENTS TAKE HUMAN RIGHTS DISCUSSION ONLINE FOR UN DECLARATION ANNIVERSARY

18. (U) IREX Internet access sites and Global Connections trainers led efforts across Turkmenistan to mark the anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Over 20 students from Ashgabat, Dashoguz, Mary and Turkmenabat took part in online and offline discussions and expressed their opinions and concerns over human rights and the impact of the Declaration on Turkmenistan, at the GCE site: <http://gcetm.net/forum/index.php?showforum=12>. One teacher from Ashgabat Turkmen-Russian School conducted a mini conference at school for her eighth-grade students, during which they expressed their own understanding of the document and students the results of that conference on the forum. Students in Turkmenabat conducted a similar discussion, moderated by GCE trainers, during a training

ASHGABAT 00000057 003 OF 003

session at the Turkmenabat IATP access site. The GCE master trainer in Dashoguz held a classroom discussion with her students. The students' engagement in off- and online discussions in the UN Declaration prompted many to consider questions related to human rights, including their own.

STUDENTS FLEX NEW GRAPHIC ARTS SKILLS IN ONLINE CONTEST

19. (U) Secondary school students throughout Turkmenistan posted more than 50 greeting cards for an online competition for New Year's on a forum at Turkmenistan's Educational Portal -- <http://gcetm.net/forum/index.php?showforum=13>. For two weeks in December, the GCE program taught students computer graphics editing, and 38 students applied their new skills by designing and exchanging electronic cards online.

FLEX ALUMNA ENCOURAGES TEAMWORK AMONG GOROGLY YOUTH

10. (U) On three nights in late December, a young FLEX alumna led a basic basketball class and practice for 15 young people at Gorogly Etrap's (Dashoguz Welayat) School No.7. By engaging local youth in a simple game of basketball, the alumna set an example of girls in sports and a healthy lifestyle, while also encouraging connections

between local youth and the local American Corner's outreach events.

Encouraging local youth to excel in competitive sports also promotes organizational skills, teamwork and communication among local youth. In contrast to Soviet tradition, which valued youth sports activities, Turkmenistan's schools have eradicated all formal sports education, not to mention arts education or related extracurricular activities. U.S. exchange program alumni have stepped into the breach to provide these resources to their peers, when they have the resources to do so.

MARY'S NIGHT OF ONE-ACT PLAYS

¶11. (U) On December 23, the Mary American Corner Peace Corps Volunteer led students in a Night of One-Act Plays for an audience of 70 locals. Performers enacted works created by the students and the volunteer, in English and depicted American values and lifestyles. Other plays portrayed important eras in U.S. history. The program developed participants' writing and acting as well as organizational skills.

TURKMENBASHY OUTREACH IN UNLIKELY LOCATION

¶12. (U) On December 20, Turkmenbashy Regional Representative -- formerly director of the Turkmenbashy American Corner -- held the latest installment of her TOEFL preparation class at the city polyclinic for eight local high school students. ACCELS volunteers and staff have continued to organize such outreach events and classes at public locations throughout the city in lieu of a permanent space in the American Corner, for which post and ACCELS continue to negotiate with local authorities.

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